

Integrity and Fragmentation*

JOHN COTTINGHAM

ABSTRACT The virtue of integrity does not appear explicitly in either the Aristotelian or the Judaeo-Christian list of virtues, but elements of both ethical systems implicitly acknowledge the importance of a unified and integrated life. This paper argues that integrity is indispensable for a good human life; the fragmented or compartmentalized life is always subject to instability, in so far as unresolved psychological conflicts and tensions may threaten to derail our ethical plans and projects. Achieving a stable and integrated life requires self-awareness; and (drawing on insights from the psychoanalytic tradition) it is suggested that self-awareness is not a simple matter, but requires a complex process of self-discovery. The paper's final section argues that although vitally necessary for the good life, integrity cannot be sufficient. Against the view of influential writers such as Bernard Williams and Harry Frankfurt, our commitment to our chosen projects, however authentic and integrated, cannot in itself give our lives meaning and value. The good and meaningful life cannot be a matter of authenticity alone, but requires us, whether we like it or not, to bring our projects into line with enduring objective values that we did not create, and which we cannot alter.

1. Introduction

The vigorous revival of virtue theory in the closing decades of the twentieth century has led to a renewed interest in questions that used to be at the centre of moral philosophy – questions about the particular *traits of character* needed to live a praiseworthy and flourishing life.

These questions were first systematically examined in the fourth century BC, by Aristotle. But curiously, integrity does not appear in the Aristotelian catalogue of virtues. We find a lot about courage, generosity, temperance, friendship, and so on, but nothing explicit about integrity. Of course, we shouldn't automatically presume that Aristotle's list of virtues ought to match our own, since inevitably conceptions of the good life vary to some extent from culture to culture. One would not, for example, expect the pagan philosophers of the classical world to anticipate the Christian conception of the 'theological virtues' (as they are often called), namely faith, hope and love, famously discussed by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians in the first century AD. Or, to take another example, the virtue of humility is conspicuous by its absence from Aristotle's ethical writings. It fits well into the Christian worldview, which extols self-sacrifice and service to others, but it doesn't quite gel with the aristocratic Aristotelian virtues, some of which require a keen sense of one's own civic importance and one's entitlement to honour and esteem.¹

Whatever the reason, integrity is not on Aristotle's list of virtues. But strangely, it is not found in the biblical list of virtues either. The Christian catalogue includes faith, hope and love, at the top of the list, and also the very un-Aristotelian virtue of humility. And there are other prominent Christian virtues, whose value is underlined in the parables of Jesus – compassion, for example, and forgiveness. But neither in the Hebrew Bible nor in the New Testament does there seem to be any explicit teaching about integrity. (There are apparent exceptions – for example Psalm 26, which begins, in the King James translation, 'Judge me O Lord for I have walked in mine integrity'; but the verses that follow express the rather general idea of leading an upright or righteous life, rather than providing any specific account of the virtue of integrity).²

So on the face of it, neither of the twin pillars of our Western culture, Athens and Jerusalem, appears to provide us with foundational teaching about integrity and its importance. Nevertheless, I

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think we can discern, in both traditions, elements that suggest an implicit recognition of the importance of what we now call integrity. Thus, Aristotle argues for the *unity of the virtues* – that they are all interconnected, so that if a person fully possesses one of them, he should have them all.³ This is a thesis much debated by commentators and critics;⁴ but whatever you make of it, it does clearly hint at the idea that the person of virtue has not just mastered several distinct and separated excellences, each in its own sphere (courage on the battlefield, for example, or generosity in money matters), but is someone who leads a life of virtue that coheres, and hangs together. I shall suggest in a moment that this holistic view of Aristotle's – the insistence that the virtues cannot be compartmentalised – has important links with the notion of integrity.

In somewhat similar fashion, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, though not explicitly invoking the concept of integrity, does seem to place great importance on a unified or integrated life. In one of the later Psalms (86) we find the prayer 'Give me, O Lord, an undivided heart', a petition for a psychological and ethical unity.⁵ The gospels speak of the importance of finding one's *true self*. Even gaining the whole world is not enough to compensate for the loss of oneself (*heautos*), says a famous passage in St Luke (9: 25). A few chapters later in the same gospel, we find the story of the prodigal son, who goes into exile to squander his inheritance, but one day wakes up and 'comes to himself' (*eis heauton elthôn*) (Luke 15:17). As the Dominican writer Timothy Radcliffe has luminously put it, the prodigal's decision to go back to his home and family is really the same as rediscovering his true self, 'since his exile from his family is an exile from his true identity as son and brother. He can only find himself again with them'⁶

The idea that I have a 'true identity', a unified, integrated self, the self I am meant to be, the self that expresses all that is best and most distinctive about me – and that the goal of my life should be, as it were, to grow into that unified self – all this may already seem rather a lot to pack into the concept of integrity. But I think this is the direction our thinking has to take, once we start to reflect seriously about what the concept means. Integrity, as its etymology suggests, has to do with integration – the *integration of the self*.

Of course there is a much thinner notion of integrity that is often found in contemporary usage. When ministers are caught out in an act of negligence or incompetence or worse they can either try to brazen it out, or they can own up and offer their resignations. When they take the latter course, their decision is often praised in the newspapers as one of 'integrity' or 'principle'. But it's not at all clear what this really amounts to. Stepping down, I suppose, is somewhat more honourable than clinging on to power in such circumstances, but it does not seem to have much to do with integrity. For presumably, before the mistakes or corruption came to light, the politician in question was quite happy to go on with his or her dubious conduct. Having to give up office is often something forced on a public figure when their position becomes untenable; but it doesn't in itself seem to bespeak any particular integrity of character.

Even when giving up office is done out of genuine principle, even when it does stem from true remorse or repentance, it's still not particularly clear why 'integrity' is an appropriate word. As typically used in the newspapers in this sort of case, 'integrity' seems to mean simply that the person in question has finally managed to behave in a reasonably honourable way. In other words, it's not much more than a synonym for 'minimal moral decency'. One can't, of course, legislate linguistic usage, and if people want to use the phrase 'a person of integrity' simply to mean 'decent person', there is nothing to stop them. But there is nevertheless something to be said for trying to preserve a richer notion of integrity, one that makes sense of the obvious etymological connection with integration. What is more, I think that exploring this richer notion is not just linguistically appropriate, but psychologically illuminating. And furthermore, I suggest it may (if I can put it this way) be *morally* helpful: it may help to enrich our understanding of how human life can best be lived.

2. The dangers of fragmentation

One way to explore this further is to reflect not on integrity, but on its opposite – fragmentation. What is so damaging about an internally fragmented or compartmentalized life? Among those who

have spoken most eloquently about the dangers of fragmentation is Alasdair MacIntyre, who was the leading voice in the revival of the virtue based-approach to ethics mentioned earlier. The typical framework of our modern age, MacIntyre points out,

partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour. So work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. So both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made over into distinct realms. And all these separations have been achieved so that it is the distinctiveness of each, and not the unity of the life of the individual who passes through those parts, in terms of which we are taught to think and to feel.⁷

Compartmentalizing, MacIntyre argues, is the great malaise of our time. Now one might initially think that compartmentalization is fairly innocuous. Why, you may ask, can't someone have several quite distinct projects or goals which perhaps may not particularly cohere or fit together? And similarly, why couldn't someone display a range of distinct and separate character traits, each of which might be valuable in its own particular sphere, without there being, as it were, any master plan that links them, or organizes them into a systematic whole? We are, after all, used to the idea of a pluralistic society, where different values and virtues co-exist; so far from insisting on a unified social template for the good life, we allow scope for different forms of self-expression by different cultures and groups. So why should not the same be true within the life of each individual? Perhaps I am hard-working in the office, but self-indulgently idle at the weekend. Perhaps I'm thoughtful and sympathetic when listening to the troubles of my family and friends, but cannot summon up much interest in the distress of those farther afield. Perhaps I'm generally careful about what I eat and drink, but like to go on a binge from time to time. Human nature is complex and multifaceted, so why not just embrace the resulting untidiness? Why not just accept, as suggested by Bernard Williams, that there are many and various human projects and human goods, the pursuit of which 'will not all fit together into one harmonious whole'.⁸

I don't claim to offer any knock-down argument that would demonstrate that an integrated life must be better than a compartmentalized life. Coercive proofs are seldom available in philosophy – certainly not in moral philosophy, where, as Aristotle observed, it is unrealistic to demand more exactitude than the subject-matter allows.⁹ Nevertheless, there are, I think, valid reasons to prefer the integrated life – to desire it in ourselves, and to admire it in others. The main reason is rather reminiscent of Plato's explanation of why knowledge is preferable to true belief. Admittedly, a belief, when true, lands you in the right place; but this may be no more than a happy accident, or a lucky guess. Knowledge, Plato observed, has the additional plus of *stability*: it is, as he put it, secured by a 'chain of reasoning'.¹⁰ In other words, the person with genuine knowledge does not just happen to get the answer right, but can show *why* it is right, and hence is on surer, more stable ground.

In somewhat similar fashion, the person who pursues his projects and desires in a piecemeal way may, let us grant, manage to live quite well, for weeks or months or even years – seemingly just as well as someone whose projects are integrated into a harmonious whole. But his life, I suggest, will be less stable. He gets along all right *by accident*, as it were. Either the parts of his life fit together by pure chance, or, more likely, they are potentially liable to clash, but it just so happens that they have not, so far, come into conflict. So although the way he lives has not so far been such as to threaten his happiness and security (or those of others), there are, in the very nature of the case, various tensions in his way of living that are always waiting to surface, and which, in moments of crisis, may erupt to damaging effect. As an ancient parable puts it, the house is built on sand; and when the winds blow and the floods come, it cannot withstand the storm in the way that is possible for the house built on rock (Matthew 7:26).

There are two particular aspects, I suggest, to the instability that besets the fragmented life: the synchronic aspect, and the diachronic aspect. Synchronically, i.e. within a particular single segment or time-slice of my life, the total set of desires and aims which I have may be in conflict with each other. Sometimes, to be sure, this is relatively benign – a mere matter of time and

resources. If I want to study a musical instrument, this may cut into the time available for learning a new language. I can't do everything, so I have to learn to prioritize: nothing wrong with that (unless perhaps, like George Harris in his recent book *Reason's Grief*, we are going to bemoan the very fact that we are finite beings with inherent restrictions on how much we can achieve in a lifetime).¹¹ But often the tensions will be far more serious, arising from unresolved conflicts in our desires and goals that amount to a fragmentation of the self.

The term 'fragmentation' may conjure up images of brokenness, of a shattered vessel. And arguably that is, in the end, what it amounts too. But we should not over-dramatize the idea of self-fragmentation, as if it represented only the extreme situation of ultimate breakdown, or complete collapse. On the contrary, it is an all too familiar fact about human nature that we are not single-minded angelic creatures, who always wholeheartedly pursue the best and noblest available option. On the contrary, we are *conflicted* beings, who in the typical case may fully recognize the genuine worth of the best option *A*, but who are often nonetheless powerfully attracted by the lure of an alternative *B*, even though we know quite well it is objectively a less good option. Eve, standing in for all mankind, was seduced by the tastiness of the apple 'when she saw it was good for food and a delight to the eyes' (Genesis 3: 6). You do not have to accept the literal truth of the story of the Fall of Man to recognise that such conflictedness is an inescapable part of our natural inheritance. We are often drawn to something that, on cool rational reflection, is clearly the lesser good. Indeed, it may not simply be the lesser good, but may be positively evil or radically detrimental to our physical or moral or spiritual wellbeing – and yet still possess for us a certain glamour or allure that makes it unbearably attractive. This is a recurring theme in the ethical writers of the ancient world, and of the medieval and early-modern periods: we may desire the what is best, but may be pulled off course because our passions draw us towards some lesser or specious good, whose pursuit may exact a terrible cost. As St Paul put it in an oft-quoted passage from his letter to the Romans, 'woe is me: the good that I would, I do not, but the evil that I would not, that I do' (Romans 7:19).

How does the person of integrity act when faced with such situations? One response is that he or she must simply exercise strength of will, grit the teeth, and adhere steadfastly to the good, putting temptation to one side. The person of integrity, in other words, is a person who can call on their powers of self-control – the *fortitudo moralis* or 'moral fortitude' which Immanuel Kant so admired.¹² Well, such self-control is no doubt admirable, and those of us who have been weak enough to give in to our baser impulses may wish we had greater strength of will. But when you reflect on it, such a solution – grimly controlling our disreputable impulses – doesn't seem to be particularly a manifestation of *integrity*. On the contrary, one might think it shows precisely that the agent in question is a divided, fragmented being – one who has to struggle to bring the desires into conformity with what reason dictates. He has certainly not *integrated* the darker side of his character into a harmonious whole. On the contrary, though he may surely deserve credit for sticking to the straight and narrow, he remains somehow a *divided self*, pulled in two directions at once.

The term 'divided self' is strongly suggestive of a psychoanalytic approach to understanding the human predicament; and my personal view is that this is precisely the direction we need to take, if we are tackling the problem of human conflictedness and its possible resolution. In short, I think a full account of the virtue of integrity, will sooner or later need to be receptive to some of the insights into the human condition articulated over the last century or so by Freud and Jung their successors. Among anglophone philosophers such ideas often encounter a great wall of indifference, and even downright hostility; but my own belief is that contemporary moral philosophy will remain seriously impoverished as long as it continues to close its mind to the psychoanalytic perspective.¹³ This is not a matter of buying into a lot of technical jargon, or of accepting all of the theoretical claims of Freudians, Jungians, Kleinians, or any of the other proliferating schools and groups. It is, instead, a matter of grasping a comparatively simple and down-to-earth insight: that our conflictedness as human beings often has its source in a certain *opacity* in our mental life. So far from being translucent goldfish, swimming around in predictable patterns in the glass bowl of the conscious mind, many of our desires and impulses are at least

partly opaque to us: they are such that we often do not fully grasp their significance, or the nature of the power they exert over us, until it is too late.

The search for integrity is essentially a quest for *self-understanding*: only by being prepared to delve into the partly submerged feelings and impulses which lie beneath the surface of our rational deliberations can we start to uncover the curious allure that certain of our desires may have for us – and continue to have, even though we may know intellectually that their worth is dubious or deceptive. Integrity is not a matter of suppressing or overriding these recalcitrant desires by main force, for that is a highly dangerous proceeding: when Freud spoke of the risks of repression, he was simply following in the wake of a long series of insights, going right back to those of Euripides in the *Bacchae* (c. 406 BC), about how we deny or suppress the darker psychic impulses at our peril. Rather, integrity is a matter of being prepared to acknowledge these irrational elements in our makeup, to bring them painfully to the surface, and try to understand them. As Carl Jung explains:

The psychoanalytic aim is to observe the shadowy presentations – whether in the form of images or of feelings – that are spontaneously evolved in the psyche and appear, without his bidding, to the man who looks within. In this way we find once more what we have repressed or forgotten. Painful though it may be, this is itself a gain – for what is inferior or even worthless belongs to me as my shadow, and gives me substance and mass. How can I be substantial if I fail to cast a shadow. I must have a dark side if I am to be whole; and inasmuch as I become conscious of my own shadow, I also remember that I am a human being like any other.¹⁴

This, in the end, is what Prospero does in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, when he finally confronts the wretched Caliban, whom he has been bullying and curbing and berating all through the play, and in the last act finally reaches out to him with the words 'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.'¹⁵

What applies to the search for synchronic integrity, trying to become self-aware about the set of impulses and desires that are part of me at this moment, or in this phase of my life, applies even more to the quest for diachronic integrity – trying to bring into harmony, and acknowledge, all the elements of my mental life from my past: everything, going back to my early childhood, that has led up to my present character and outlook. Indeed, on reflection it is quite clear that the synchronic and the diachronic dimensions are closely connected. For (if Freud and his successors are right) precisely what gives some of my present ambitions and inclinations their dynamic power is often that they are *distorted projections* of impulses from my early years.

The complexities of the human psyche, the opaque and intensely problematic character of our deepest motivations, mean that the deeper significance of the very goods we strive for, the very plans we construct, is often obscured even from the strivers and constructors themselves. Standard modern moral philosophy typically works with the picture of a fully autonomous, wholly rational agent, entirely in control of the planning and deliberation that determine his or her life's trajectory, the career goals, the ambitions, and all the rest. But Freud's analysis of psychological development suggests that even for the most seemingly rational adult, the events of infancy, not fully understood or assimilated, can lie dormant until they work themselves out in the seemingly rational choices of later adult life.

But does this complicated psychoanalytic framework really have much to do with the ordinary problems of politicians or business people or academics who are faced with challenges to their integrity? The growth of a stable and harmonious interior life is not necessarily a matter of everyone's needing permanent external help in the consulting room, but may be (as Carl Jung and others have suggested)¹⁶ a matter for each individual to continue to sort out largely on his or her own, through the right kind of self-scrutiny and interior reflection. But however it is achieved, such progress towards psychological harmony does seem to me an unavoidable part of cultivating the virtue of integrity. We cannot act with integrity until we know *who we are*; and we cannot know who we are by rational deliberation alone, but only through listening to all elements that make us up, and the whole complicated past story that has shaped us, and striving to understand the impact and the significance of as much of this as we can.

How does this connect with the stability that I spoke of earlier – the power to weather the storms of life? Consider a budding politician, driven by ambition, eager to succeed, eager to please. Like all those who seek power, he is potentially vulnerable to the familiar forces of corruption, but in his early years, as a local counsellor, manages to grit his teeth, refuse bribes, play things by the book. He wants to look good, to appear honest, and perhaps even has a genuine desire to do what is right, and to serve the community. Yet he somehow allows all the various conflicting impulses to remain in place in his psyche – like a disorganized cloud of randomly buzzing bees, acting individually, rather than as a harmonious colony. Let us assume that in spite of all this, he manages to survive and prosper. But, now, as he advances in his career, rising to the national parliament, and then becoming a minister, he experiences a vast increase in his personal power to control events. An array of subordinates now defer to him; his word is accepted without question; his signature carries automatic weight. I need not spell out the depressingly familiar denouement: he overreaches himself, is discovered to have fiddled his expenses claims, switched his primary residence to evade tax, and so on down the tawdry list of moral failures that our predatory swarm of journalists delight in exposing every day. In short, the temptations to personal enrichment that he resisted earlier, when the stakes were lower, turn out to be almost irresistible once he acquires the power to make massive gains without (as he supposes) any serious danger of being challenged.

In what way does the more principled politician, who resists temptation, differ from this? Not, I would argue, by some miraculous application of moral fibre which the venal politician did not possess, nor by some ‘factor X’ called ‘integrity’ or ‘principle’. Rather, the politician of genuine integrity (and the same goes for any public figure or indeed private person) is essentially someone who *knows who he is*. His ambition is not complicated by unconscious infantile projections (the impossible struggle to climb ever higher to please a demanding parent who never bestowed the unconditional love he craved); nor is it driven by unresolved internal conflict (the genuine wish to serve the public, but the simultaneous infantile impulse to show off with a grand house that he cannot really afford without dishonesty). These kinds of shipwreck of a career, familiar in countless walks of life, characteristically hinge on the *failure to address internal conflict until it is too late*. The person of integrity, by contrast, is different. She is, to be sure, not an angelic zombie for whom there are no hard questions: she still has to work out priorities, what is of most value, what is lower down the list. But what she does have is a certain psychological *wholeness* – an understanding of the significance of all her various goals and desires, and the true place of each in her overall life-plan – how they fit in with her sense of who she really is. For, as Aristotle once said, ‘not to have your life planned towards some end is a sign of great folly.’¹⁷ And as he might have added, had his ethics been less rationalistic and more psychologically nuanced, ‘not to strive to understand what lies beneath the surface of your rational deliberations is a sign of even greater folly.’

3. Is integrity enough?

I have so far argued that integrity involves a certain kind of integration of the psyche, the product of a process of self-discovery and self-reflection. The person of integrity has a shape to their life. Instead of conflict and compartmentalization, they have discovered, or at least are partly on the way to discovering, their true self, the person they most truly and sincerely want to be.

Construed this way, integrity might well be called the master-virtue. For all the reasons I have been discussing, it emerges as a crucially necessary constituent of a good and worthwhile life. Given this, one might well think that it is a virtue whose importance can hardly be exaggerated. But in the last hundred years or more we have seen the increasing popularity of what is indeed (on my view) an exaggerated and distorted view of the importance of integrity. Labelled in various ways, as ‘self-authorship’, as ‘authenticity’, and as ‘whole-heartedness’, integrity has, I believe, been hijacked by a variety of moral philosophers, and given a prominence in the evaluation of human conduct that cannot be morally justified. Not content with the thought that integrity is a vitally necessary condition for the good life (a thesis I fully support and have been at pains to defend in this paper), the proponents of the exaggerated view of integrity’s value have come near to

suggesting that it is a *sufficient* condition – all that is required, the very essence or key to a worthwhile human existence. In this final part of the paper, I want to argue that this is a worrying mistake. For in the end, it cuts integrity free from the objective moral orientation which it needs to qualify as a genuine virtue, and allows it to mutate into mere pride and self-idolatry.

The worrying thesis I have in mind has received two of its most elegant recent formulations in Britain and America respectively, at the hands of Bernard Williams and of Harry Frankfurt, both of whom must be counted, on any reckoning, as among the most subtle as well as the most influential moral philosophers of modern times. In his 1993 masterpiece *Shame and Necessity*, Williams articulated a conception of ethics that lays great emphasis on the idea of an agent's *self-conception*: his sense of himself as an individual whose life is organized around certain chosen projects – projects that that underpin his very sense of identity or selfhood.

So far, perhaps, so good – indeed the conception just described seems to have many links with the virtue of integrity as I have been describing it in the present paper. What Williams goes on to develop, however, is (what in my view is) the much more problematic idea that these individual projects, expressions of the agent's sense of identity and selfhood, can function, in a certain way, as a source of value, as possessing *normative force* for the agent – in other words, that they can ground and underpin a sense that some course of action is *necessary*, or incumbent upon us. As examples of what he has in mind, Williams makes elegant use of various characters from ancient Greek tragedy, such as the character of Ajax, the eponymous hero of Sophocles' play, who is presented as committed irrevocably to a given decision (in this case to commit suicide), rather than endure the dishonour and shame attendant on certain disgraceful acts that he has been seen to perform (we need not go into the details). Williams describes the situation as follows:

‘[these] characters are represented ... as experiencing a necessity to act in certain ways, a conviction that they must do certain things ... The source of the necessity is in the agent ... The sense of this necessity lies in the thought that one could not live and look others in the eye if one did certain things ... These necessities are internal, grounded in the *êthos*, the projects, the individual nature of the agent ...’¹⁸

To understand exactly what is meant by this idea of an ‘internal’ necessity with its source ‘in the agent’, we have to read it in the light of Bernard Williams' scepticism about what he calls the ‘peculiar institution’ of morality. The morality system, as commonly understood during the dominance of Christian morality and its aftermath, is, says Williams, peculiar, in that it is taken to consist of an objective array of putatively inescapable obligations that are supposed to govern my actions, irrespective of how I may personally want to live, or what projects I might decide to adopt.¹⁹ Arguing that the morality system exercises a specious tyranny over us, and that we would be ‘better off without it’,²⁰ Williams makes it plain that he himself recognizes no ‘external’ sources of obligation; the only kind of ethical necessity or normativity he acknowledges is one that arises, in the way just described, from the authentic choices of the agent to live a certain way, and to set himself certain projects.

The influence of Friedrich Nietzsche (whom Williams frequently refers to in his later writings) is conspicuously apparent here: God is dead; the idea of external reasons and ultimately binding obligations is an illusion; and we must have the courage to live in the light of our *own* best informed choices and our own chosen goals. For, as Williams puts it, ‘our ethical condition ... lies ... beyond Christianity [and] its Kantian ... legacies ... We know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world, that our history tells no purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities.’²¹

Harry Frankfurt, born the same year as Bernard Williams (1929), comes at these issues from a different direction, but seems to end up with a similar idea – that, in the absence of any eternal objective source of value, it is our own choices and acts of will that must serve as (to use his phrase) ‘generators of value’. By loving something, or caring about it, Frankfurt argues, we imbue it with value; and the ‘heart of the matter’, he goes on to insist, is ‘neither affective nor cognitive [but] *volitional*’.²² Value, in other words, derives from the will: it is not a function of how we feel

towards something, nor about our perceiving or recognizing some truth about it, but rather a matter of our exercising our will, our choice, to care about something or someone. The resulting picture is one where, in a certain sense, it is we who *create* values by our own authentic choices. By deciding what we care about, and setting ourselves to pursue it, we manage to make our lives good and valuable. As Daniel Markovits has phrased it in a perceptive recent essay on Bernard Williams (though some of his remarks could equally apply to Frankfurt), ‘insofar as integrity is ethically important ... a person who forms ambitions and plans ... undertakes to *author her own moral life* [and] thereby (in a way) *creates ethical reasons for herself* ...’²³

Let me acknowledge right away that Frankfurt presents his position with great finesse, with a view to avoiding an obvious and damaging objection, namely that a mere act of will or arbitrary exercise of choice cannot in itself be enough to imbue something with value (if so, my mere decision to stand on one leg would, absurdly, make that a good thing to do). Love, Frankfurt argues, is much more than *mere* voluntary commitment. I might decide to stand on one leg, then decide to stop, and there seems nothing valuable here, merely a contingent and fluctuating whim. But truly loving someone is not like this: it places us under a necessity which thereafter commits us, whether we like it or not. Love, as Frankfurt puts it, ‘binds our wills’. Yet just as with rationality, which ‘guides us authoritatively in the use of our minds’, we do not experience the resulting ‘commanding necessity’ as an irksome constraint, but on the contrary as dignifying our lives, as something ‘humane and ennobling’, as bringing an experience of ‘liberation and enhancement’.²⁴

The idea of a kind of ennobling necessity in such cases is actually an ancient religious idea – the idea that service to the good and the true is paradoxically liberating; or, as Cranmer’s translation of an ancient prayer has it, God is he ‘whose service is perfect freedom.’²⁵ In philosophical form, it is developed by Descartes in the Fourth Meditation, when he argues that ‘a great light in the intellect generates a great propensity in the will’: the light of reason, and the light of goodness, once clearly perceived, give me no choice but to assent; but this is not servitude but, the highest grade of freedom.²⁶

So far so good. But it is important to remember that the traditional Augustinian and Cartesian picture of submission to an ennobling necessity only works, in the moral case, because of a strict objectivism of value. For Descartes, as emerges quite explicitly in the Fourth Meditation, the *ratio veri* and the *ratio boni* – the domains of logical rationality and of moral value – are equally grounded in an eternal and independent reality, the source of all perfection.

But now (to come to my own serious reservations about Frankfurt’s picture), without this kind of metaphysical underpinning (either of a theistic kind or perhaps some alternative that does the same objective work), there is a risk that the Frankfurtian conception of value has nothing in the end to support it but an individual’s own choice to love something. Frankfurt may have successfully pointed out that the commitment involved in loving is not (as he phrases it) ‘*merely* voluntary’, since it places us under a sort of ‘commanding necessity’. But for all that, the underlying idea remains that we can by loving [quote unquote] ‘create ethical reasons’ for ourselves. By the volitional act of commitment we imbue the objects of our care with value, which thereafter, and in virtue of that commitment, exerts a commanding power over us. Yet it is very unclear how this is supposed to yield genuine normativity. Are we to suppose to accept that my own choices and projects, provided they are selected with integrity, as representing my conception of who I am, what I care about, and where I want my life to be going – that such authentic choices are enough to give my life value and meaning? In short, is integrity, or what Frankfurt calls ‘wholeheartedness’,²⁷ all that is needed?

The answer, surely, must be no. To go back to our miscreant politician, caught out in some expenses scam, let us imagine that his own choice about who he truly is, about where he wants to be going with his life, is a crudely egotistical one: all he loves is power and money, and to hell with everyone else, and with every value and convention that stands in his way. He lies, destroys evidence, refuses to resign, brazens it out, sues his detractors, and ends up on top. Does he have integrity? Well, in one sense, it is hard to deny that he does. He has integrated all his desires and ambitions into an all-consuming project – power and ego gratification – and has worked out, with

complete honesty and transparency, what is needed to get there. His decisions are authentic, if anyone's are. He is an authentic, fully integrated, crook.

But does this imbue his life with meaning and value? Surely not; because a person's choices, his projects, cannot function as generators of true value if they are base, or misguided, or cruel, or vicious, or rampantly egoistical. For in the end (as an increasing number of moral philosophers are now, mercifully, prepared to recognize, with the perhaps surprising recent revival of ethical objectivism), we cannot create value, but only respond to it.

If integrity in the sense of self-authorship and authenticity were really sufficient for a good life, then horrible consequences would follow. We should have to say that the sordid and disgusting lives just described – the rampant pursuit of power and money – are good human lives for the agents involved, always provided the individuals in question sincerely and wholeheartedly pursue them, without contradiction or conflict. Or we would have to say as Nietzsche does, in one of the most disturbed and disturbing passages in the history of Western philosophy, that we can 'invert' eternal values, and that the strong and mighty individual, bent on self-fulfilment, is fully justified in suppressing all human impulses of compassion, if these get in the way of his will to power.²⁸

The upshot is that integrity, construed as a consistent, integrated and wholehearted pursuit of one's chosen projects, though it remains necessary for the good life, can never be sufficient. Lucifer no doubt had integrity when he cried (in the words Milton brilliantly puts into his mouth in *Paradise Lost*) 'better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n'.²⁹ But this was an integrity that had degenerated into mere pride and self-idolatry – integrity cut off from the pursuit of the good that gives it value and purpose. When the Psalmist prays 'Give me, O Lord, an undivided heart', the psychological wholeness that is sought is not consistency for its own sake, but the coherence and clarity of vision that is prepared to acknowledge an objective system of values which we did not create, and which we cannot alter by our own preferences, however committed they may be.

Frankfurt actually concedes that integrity is not sufficient, in the last two pages of *The Reasons of Love*. The book ends with a strange ironic backtracking, where the author quotes an anecdote about a woman who once told him that the only important things in life are honesty and a sense of humour, and then after a moment added 'you know, I'm not really all that sure about honesty'. It's a joke, of course; but behind it I think one can read a certain authorial awkwardness or embarrassment about the backtracking, which comes with a severe cost, namely that of separating off the meaningful life from the good life. Being wholehearted, Frankfurt finally concludes, is compatible 'not only with being morally somewhat imperfect, but even with being dreadfully and irredeemably wicked.' And hence the function of love (commitment, caring) is, as Frankfurt ends up concluding, 'not to make people good, but just to make their lives meaningful, and thus to help make their lives in that way good for them.'³⁰ So all the references throughout the book to Dante and Augustine, to commanding necessity, rationality and love, to the parallelism between logical and moral constraints, all vanish in a puff of smoke, and we are left with something's merely being 'good for me', if I decide wholeheartedly to pursue it. This would leave us with no more than a depressing tautology – that people care about what they care about – but with nothing genuinely normative. There would be nothing to guide our choices towards the light of objective goodness, without which human life has no meaning beyond our temporary success in furthering whatever projects, however perverse, we happen to decide to pursue. To resist this depressing conclusion, there is no alternative but to put Nietzsche behind us, and firmly to reject the volitionalist account of value which attracted both Williams, and, in modified form, Frankfurt. We could put the point either by saying that mere integrity is not sufficient for the good life, or alternatively by reserving the label 'true integrity' for integrated conduct that is directed towards a good and a virtuous way of living. Either way, the upshot, from the point of view of morality, is effectively the same.

4. Conclusion

Let me, very briefly, sum up. Integrity is perhaps the hardest virtue to achieve – striving to make sure that all parts of our outlook fit together, that there are no hidden projections or self-deceptions

distorting our attitudes. If we can do this much, then we may be able to avoid the pitfalls of self-alienation and fragmentation. And perhaps we can manage to take a first step to becoming who we are meant to be.

But only a first step. For I have been arguing that integrity has an inescapably moral and (I would myself add) a spiritual dimension, being concerned with wholeness at the level of a person's inner psychological and ethical makeup, and, ultimately, with the perennial struggle of all of us, as conflicted beings, to orient ourselves towards the good. Becoming what I am meant to be can never be a matter of autonomy and authenticity alone, but requires me, whether I like it or not, to bring my life into line with true and enduring objective values that I did not create, and which I cannot alter.

The conflictedness, which is our human lot as flawed creatures, generates tension, uncertainty, vacillation, self-doubt. Its opposite is tranquillity, that *concordia animi* – or peace of mind of which the Stoic philosophers spoke.³¹ There can be no philosophical proof that such concord is the fruit of orienting oneself towards the good; this is I think partly a matter of faith, and it is certainly one of the most fundamental elements in most religious systems of thought. But that does not mean that philosophers should be determined at all costs to resist it. An ancient moral and spiritual tradition argues that tranquillity arises when meaning and goodness come together, when wholeheartedness is conjoined to virtue. And irrespective of one's religious commitments, or lack of them, it is hard to think of a higher good to which human life might aspire.

Department of Philosophy, University of Reading, Reading RG6 6AA, England.
J.G.Cottingham@Reading.ac.uk

NOTES

- ¹ Compare the virtue of *megalopsychia*, in *Nicomachean Ethics* [325 BC], Bk III, Chs 2 and 3.
- ² Psalm 26 [25]: 1. The Hebrew phrase translated 'in mine integrity' is '*be tummi*'. *Tum* (or *tom*) means wholeness, or completeness; the underlying idea being that sinning takes something from you. (Compare the English idiom which describes a person of bad character as *lacking* in character, or showing a *deficiency*.) 'Wholeness' or 'completeness' of character (*tum*) is thus seen as implying an absence of bad characteristics; which connects with the derivative sense of the term, namely innocence. (I am grateful to Iddo Landau for his help here and at note 5, below.) Another possible source for the idea of integrity is the Letter of James, in the New Testament, which calls for the kind of purity of heart that is incompatible with being 'double-minded' (*dipsychos*); James 4:8. (I am grateful to the Revd F. Gerald Downing for drawing my attention to this text.)
- ³ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk VI, Ch. 13.
- ⁴ For an illuminating discussion, see Susan Wolf, 'Moral Psychology and the Unity of the Virtues', *Ratio* Vol. XX no 2 (June 2009), pp. 145-167.
- ⁵ Psalm 86 [85]:11. In Hebrew the Psalmist prays to God *yahed levavi*, literally 'unite my heart!' (the imperative verb *yahed* comes from the root *ehad*, meaning one).
- ⁶ Timothy Radcliffe, *Why Go to Church: The Drama of the Eucharist* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 20.
- ⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1985), Ch. 15, p. 205; punctuation modified.
- ⁸ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1985), Ch. 8, p. 153.
- ⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk I, Ch. 3.
- ¹⁰ 'True opinions are fine and useful as long as they stay with us; but they do not stay, and they depart from the mind. So they are not of great value until you fasten them down by working out the reason why. This process, Meno my friend, is recollection, as we agreed earlier. Once they are fastened, they become knowledge and then they are more permanent. Hence knowledge is a finer and better thing than true opinion, since it is secured by a chain' (Plato, *Meno* [c. 370 BC], 98a 1–5).
- ¹¹ 'Our values are pursued in a world that is very unfriendly and hostile to our efforts and ... our own deepest values war against each other with tragic results.' George Harris, *Reason's Grief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 15-16.

- ¹² Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals, Part II Doctrine of Virtue* [*Metaphysik der Sitten: Tugendlehre*, 1797], Introduction, §1.
- ¹³ Compare John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Ch. 4.
- ¹⁴ Carl G. Jung, ‘Problems of Modern Psychotherapy’ [‘Die Probleme der Modernen Psychotherapie’ 1929], in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul. Essays from the 1920s and 1930s*, translated C. F. Baynes (London: Routledge, 1933), p. 40.
- ¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* [c.1610], Act V, Scene 1.
- ¹⁶ ‘What was formerly a method of medical treatment now becomes a method of self-education’. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, p. 61. Cf. Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life*, p. 151f.
- ¹⁷ *Eudemean Ethics* [c. 325 BC], 1214b10-11.
- ¹⁸ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), Ch. 5, p. 103.
- ¹⁹ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Ch 10.
- ²⁰ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 174.
- ²¹ Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, p. 166.
- ²² Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 41 and 42.
- ²³ D. Markovits, ‘The Architecture of Integrity’, in D. Callcut (ed.), *Reading Bernard Williams* (London: Routledge, 2009), Ch. 6, p. 121.
- ²⁴ Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, p. 64.
- ²⁵ From the second Collect (‘For Peace’) at Morning Prayer, *Book of Common Prayer* [1662]. 1662 is the date of the finally approved version, though most of the formulations date from the previous century, owing much to Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556). The notion has Stoic antecedents; see Seneca, *De vita beata* [c. AD 58], xv, 7: *In regno nati sumus; deo parere libertas est* (‘We are born in a kingdom; obedience to God is freedom’). I am grateful to The Revd F. Gerald Downing for drawing my attention to this passage.
- ²⁶ *Meditations on First Philosophy* [*Meditationes de prima philosophia*, 1641], trans. J. Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, rev. 1996), p. 40.
- ²⁷ Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, Ch 3, passim.
- ²⁸ See Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886], trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), for his diatribe against pity, and his impassioned railing against those moralists of the ‘herd who ‘have an almost feminine inability to remain spectators, to let someone suffer’ (§202); this is contrasted with the spirit of the ‘new philosopher’ which will ‘grow to such height and force that it feels the compulsion [for] a reevaluation of values, under whose new pressure and hammer a conscience would be steeled, a heart turned to bronze’ (§203). To be repulsed by what Nietzsche says here is not to deny the richness and power of many of his philosophical insights in ethics; for a highly insightful exploration of these, see Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- ²⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk I (1667), line 263.
- ³⁰ Frankfurt, *Reasons of Love*, p. 99.
- ³¹ For the Stoic ideal of tranquillity of mind (‘*summum bonum animi concordia*’), see Seneca, *De Vita Beata* [c. AD 58], VIII, 6.